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Published in:
Keeping in Touch with Pragma-Dialectics

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
Final author's version (accepted by publisher, after peer review)

Publication date:
2011

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

van Laar, J. A., & Godden, M. (2011). The pragma-dialectical approach to circularity in argumentation. In E. Feteris, B. Garssen, & F. Snoeck Henkemans (Eds.), *Keeping in Touch with Pragma-Dialectics* (pp. 265 - 280). John Benjamins Publishers.

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The pragma-dialectical approach to circularity in argumentation

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ABSTRACT: In this contribution we start by giving a critical survey of various approaches to question begging arguments, which leads to three desiderata for such theories. Next, we examine how question begging is dealt with in the pragma-dialectical theory of argumentation, discuss a number of interpretative issues that this account gives rise to, and propose a criterion that, in our view, fits in with the pragma-dialectical theory of question begging. We conclude by discussing the pragma-dialectical account in the light of the desiderata.

KEYWORDS: Circular argumentation, Pragma-dialectical theory of argumentation, Question begging argument

1. Introduction

If one pictures an argumentative discussion as a journey which starts from a situation where an antagonist and a protagonist disagree on whether to accept a particular standpoint, and where the desired point of arrival would be a resolution of this issue on the merits of the cases presented by both parties, then, in the ideal situation, the parties should move as directly as they are capable of towards this endpoint. Running in loops, whatever its attractions, would have to be avoided. When taking a closer look at circularity in argumentation various questions arise. What makes an argument circular? Are circular arguments fallacious? How is circularity connected to question-begging? This contribution focuses on how circularity in argumentation and question begging are dealt with in the pragma-dialectical approach (van Eemeren and Grootendorst, 1987, 1992a, 2004).

We start from the assumption that an argument is made up of reasoning used for the purposes “of trying to resolve or deal with conflict or instability that has arisen between two parties” (Walton, 1991, p. 298). In Section 2 we survey the insights and shortcomings of a variety of theoretical approaches to question-begging circularity, which leads to a number of desiderata for a theory of circularity in argumentation. (Here we use the term ‘circularity’ in a sense which is neutral concerning any possible fallaciousness, while terms such as ‘vicious circularity’ or ‘question begging’ will connote fallaciousness.) In Section 3 we examine a number of passages in which the pragma-dialectical approach to circularity is laid out. In Section 4 we attempt to answer a few interpretative

questions that these passages give rise to, arriving at a criterion for the fallacy of question begging that we think fits the pragma-dialectical account best. We conclude, in Section 5, with an assessment of the pragma-dialectical concept of the fallacy of question begging.

2. Theoretical overview

2.1 Aristotle

Aristotle seems to have provided two different accounts of begging the question, one dialectical and the other logical or epistemic.¹ According to the dialectical account, proposed in the *Sophistical Refutations* (167a 37-40, 181a 15-21) and the *Topics* (162b 31- 163a 13), begging the question consists in violating a rule in the question-and-answer game of *elenchus* (refutation) by asking one's interlocutor to directly grant the question at issue, rather than deducing it indirectly from answers (concessions) given to other questions. In the *Prior Analytics* (64b 28-37) by contrast, begging the question is characterised as a failure of demonstration whereby one tries to establish some conclusion on the basis of premises less certain than or equally unknown as the conclusion itself.

Contemporary treatments of begging the question did not initially pursue a dialectical approach since, as Robinson (1971, pp. 115-116) observed, typically arguers are not engaged in academic games but are searching after truth or rationally acceptable belief, so the charge that they are violating a rule for a game of question-and-answer seems contrived and misplaced.

2.2 Logical approaches

Instead contemporary treatments first attempted a logical diagnostic approach. Sanford (1972, p. 197), who rejects the logical approach to begging the question, nevertheless offers an especially acute definition of it when portraying the position of Hoffman (1971).

An argument begs the question if every [minimally sufficient (Sanford 1981)] conjunction of its premises from which the conclusion follows has as a conjunct a proposition identical with the conclusion. A degenerate case of such question begging is provided by an argument in which the sole premiss is identical with the conclusion.

Similarly, Robinson makes his character Ted define 'question begging argument' as an argument that has a premise that assumes, or to be more specific: entails, the argument's conclusion (1971, p. 113).

(See note 2 for Robinson's view of such arguments.)

We detect at least three problems with a logical approach. First, a logical approach does not seem to provide an analysis or explanation of what can go wrong with circular arguments making some of them vicious. While an argument form such as 'A, therefore A' is transparently circular, it is also plainly deductively valid. This is the first indication that if circularity turns out to be an error, it cannot be a logical error. As Woods and Walton (1975, p. 112) say "semantic virtues may, in their epistemic analogues, be unredeemable rogues."

Further, as Robinson (1971) points out, the semantic conception of begging the question, i.e. "assuming what you are trying to prove", seems to rule out forms of deduction where the conclusion is somehow 'contained in' the premises.² Thus, on this conception, many putatively good arguments, including all entailments or at least the immediate inferences, are in danger of being classified as fallaciously question-begging even though they might be cognitively informative or dialectically useful. Seemingly, then, not all semantically circular arguments are epistemically or dialectically roguish. Thus, among the valid arguments a distinction must be made between the cogent and the viciously circular ones, and that does not seem possible on purely formal grounds. A

second problem with a logical approach is that, as Sanford observes (1972, p. 197), it requires a theory, or at least a criterion, of propositional identity. Problematically, many obvious contenders are inadequate. Logical equivalence fails as a sufficient condition for fallaciousness, as it forbids not only many immediate inferences but also argument forms such as *modus ponens* and disjunctive syllogism (Woods & Walton, 1975, pp. 109, 112).³ Orthographic identity fails both as a necessary condition since it allows double-negation elimination as a non-circular form of argument (Sanford, 1972, p. 197) and as a sufficient condition since equivocal terms and non-co-referential indexicals will not produce truth-functional equivalence (Sorensen, 1991, p. 247; Sinnott-Armstrong, 1999, p. 175).

Woods & Walton (1975, p. 107 ff.) distinguish between the *equivalence* form of circular reasoning – where some premise (conjunct) is equivalent or even identical to the conclusion – and the *dependence* form – where “[the] conclusion is presupposed by a premiss or where some premiss actually rests on the conclusion, so that in order to accept the premiss, one need first accept the conclusion” (1975, p. 108).⁴ Since the dependence form of circularity involves a pragmatic, rather than a syntactic or semantic relationship between the premise and the conclusion of some argument, a third problem of logical accounts is that they seem to lack the theoretical resources to handle dependence versions of circularity.

Difficulties such as these prompted many theorists to move away from purely logical attempts to characterize begging the question.⁵ Circularity might turn out to be a formal property of arguments, but fallacious, or vicious circularity is not (cf. Walton, 1985; Wilson, 1988, p. 40; Palmer, 1981, p. 393, for similar views). As alternatives to formalist approaches, a variety of approaches emerged which sought to identify the fallacious elements of circular arguments among their informal – typically contextual or pragmatic – features.

2.3 Doxastic approaches

First among these was the doxastic or psychological approach, where the fallaciousness of viciously circular arguments is understood to be dependent on an arguer's beliefs and is thereby an audience-relative feature of it. As Sorensen (1996, p. 52) puts it, "To beg the question is to beg it against *someone*."⁶ Here, what is at issue is the actual manner in which, or grounds upon which, arguers come to believe, or would come to believe, the premises and conclusion of some argument (Sanford, 1972).⁷

Consider the disjunctive syllogism. As Woods and Walton (1975, pp. 110 ff.) demonstrate, the *synchronic*, logical structure of this semantic implication is not equivalent to the *diachronic*, doxastic

structure of the corresponding mental inference. Unlike an implication, the premises of an inference do not always commute: 'p or q, not-p, therefore q' is truth-functionally – but not intensionally – equivalent to 'not-p, p or q, therefore q.' If the order of the premises in an inference reflects the order in which the information becomes available, and if the disjunctive premise is understood as implying the message that the speaker does not know which of p and q is the case, the second inference should be evaluated differently from the first. The second inference would, for example, violate Grice's maxim of quantity (when putting forward the second premise). It would also seem to beg the question, since, given the correctness of the first premise, the second premise is only acceptable if one accepts the conclusion. Thus, as Sanford (1981, p. 148) also observes, the cogency or fallacious circularity of an argument having the form of a disjunctive syllogism seems to depend on arguer-relative facts such as the order and manner in which the arguer(s) come to believe the premises and the conclusion.

Thus Sanford (1972, p. 198) defines a question begging argument as follows:

An argument formulated for Smith's benefit ... begs the question either if Smith believes one of the premises only because he already believes the conclusion or if Smith would believe one of the premises only if he already believed the conclusion.

The fallaciousness of a circular argument is explained by its failure to “increase the degree of reasonable confidence which [its audience] has in the truth of the conclusion” (*ibid.*).

A problem with doxastic approaches is that they seem to yield a relativism where the same argument can be both fallacious and not fallacious depending only on the arguer’s psychological states (Biro, 1977).

2.4 Epistemic approaches

Epistemic approaches to begging the question are based on a different pragmatic failure of circular arguments, expressed in Goldstick’s (2003, p. 130) characterization that circular arguments are “necessarily useless *probatively*.”

On epistemic accounts (Biro, 1977, 1984), the probative futility of viciously circular arguments is explained with reference to what Butchvarov (1970, pp. 35, 89 ff.) called the “epistemic seriousness” of argument – “a feature of arguments which has to do with the relative [or comparative] *knowability* of premises and conclusion” (Biro, 1977, p. 264). “An ‘epistemically serious argument’,” Biro writes (*ibid.*), “is one which leads validly from more clearly known to less clearly

known truths.” A circular argument fails to be epistemically serious because its premises cannot be known independently of its conclusion.

Importantly, according to Biro (1977, p. 262) the comparative knowability of claims is not a knower-relative feature of them, and does not have to do with any temporal or causal relations by which any knower actually came to accept them. Rather, the comparative knowability of some pair of claims has to do with whether, and to what degree, either of them *could be known independently of the other* (Biro, 1977, pp. 265-266). Thus, “the knowability of propositions is ... to be distinguished from their being known (let alone from their being believed etc.) by this or that individual” (Biro, 1977, p. 270). Instead of being relative to an arguer (or an arguer’s psychological situation), comparative knowability is relative to an arguer’s *epistemic situation*, understood in an objectivist way. “Comparative knowability,” Biro writes (1984, p. 243), “should be thought of as relative to an ideal reasoner, with the acuity, logical or epistemic, of actual reasoners being irrelevant.”

Yet, what seems to matter in determining whether an argument is viciously circular is not how I *might have* come to accept some premise, but rather how I *actually* did. The fact that I *could have* come to accept a premise through some non-circular chain of reasoning does not show that I *have* some independent reason for accepting that premise – only that some such independent reason *exists* whether or not it is available *to me*. From a pragmatic stance, vicious circularity must be

determined not on the basis of how some ideal epistemic agent in an ideal epistemic situation *might* have come to accept some premise, but rather how some particular and situated actual reasoner *actually* did support the premise, or whether there are routes for supporting this premise available in the actual doxastic or dialectic situation at hand.

2.5 The shift to the dialectical

In comparing the doxastic and epistemic approaches, one unifying feature stands out. Both agree that question-begging is a pragmatic failure of argument to achieve certain mental purposes. Wilson (1988, p. 50) makes the turn to conversational, rather than mental purposes, writing: “The key to understanding the nature of viciously circular arguments lies in the context in which the argument occurs. ... Roughly speaking, a circular argument is vicious if in the context in which it occurs it is not suited to fulfill the principal conversational purpose for which it was advanced.”

Indeed while each pragmatic account differs as to how to characterize the probative function of argument, each agrees that question-begging arguments fail in their probative functions. Like the doxastic and epistemic approaches, the dialectical approach characterizes question begging arguments as arguments that fail to achieve a particular purpose. But different from the former

approaches, the dialectical one conceives of this purpose in conversational terms. Walton (1994, p. 96) describes begging the question as “an inherently pragmatic failure,” and offers an approach where “The fallacy of begging the question is analyzed as a failure to fulfil one particular function of argument – the probative or ‘proving’ function – where the failure blocks the argument from fulfilling or contributing to the goals of the dialogue in which the arguer is supposed to be engaged.” Thus, the goals and other pragmatic features of an argument must be found contextually, in the conversation at hand.

Yet, the epistemic approach is correct in claiming that contextual features ought not to depend on the psychological idiosyncrasies of individual arguers. In an attempt to mend the rift existing between epistemic and doxastic approaches, Ritola (2003, p. 16) suggests a view that combines the agent-dependent element found in doxastic approaches and the non-psychologistic element found in epistemic approaches: “Arguments are given in respect to some knowledge-base externalized through the process of argumentation. To propose an argument is to suggest that someone’s knowledge-base needs to be revised. In a question-begging argument, a proposition(s) [*sic*] that is not in our knowledge-base is inserted into it, and something is claimed to follow from it. The argument is surely valid, but it makes an unfounded revision to the knowledge-base.”

An obvious way of tracking contextual commitments – both epistemic and conversational – is to view them in the context of an argumentative dialogue. Using a dialogue as a diachronic, commitment-tracking mechanism, Walton (1994, pp. 127-128) presents a dialectical account of diagnosing and analyzing the occurrence of question-begging as a pragmatic failure of argument.

The determination of *petitio* in a given case, according to this analysis, is a matter of the lines of argumentation leading into the proponent's conclusion available to the questioner. If no lines into a premise are open that do not already presume the truth of the conclusion, then the argument cannot fulfil its proper probative function in the dialogue. For this reason, an argument that begs the question can properly be evaluated as fallacious in a given case. The question of whether an argument begs the question is, by these lights, a matter of the context of dialogue.

2.6 Desiderata for theories of question-begging

The foregoing considerations seem to yield the following desiderata for any viable theory of fallacious circularity. Such theories should:

1. achieve a reflective equilibrium between theory and pretheoretical intuitive judgements

(understood as reflecting the ordinary usage of the terms) concerning when the fallacy is committed which accurately and reliably distinguishes fallaciously vicious from innocuous forms of circularity
2. explain the failure of viciously circular arguments as a pragmatic rather than a structural feature of argument such that
 - a. if the purpose of argumentation is rationally resolving or dealing with conflicts or instabilities between two parties, begging the question is best understood as a conversational flaw rather than an epistemic or doxastic one
3. recognize the contextual and diachronic (or cumulative) structure of argument and inference in such a way that they
 - a. diagnose and evaluate the fallaciousness of circularity within the context of some particular argumentative situation, by tracking the commitments and changes in commitment of the arguers involved, and
 - b. diagnose and evaluate the fallaciousness of circularity internally with respect to the *rational* perspective of individual agents (the arguers/participants),⁸ by providing criteria for what counts as equivalence or dependence, and by establishing the

availability of justificatory routes, which accurately represent the actual positions of the participants to the argument in a way that is neither unrealistically objectivistic nor psychologistic.

In what follows, we will introduce the pragma-dialectical account of question begging, offer what we hope is an acceptable set of criteria for question-begging in a pragma-dialectical fashion, and conclude by briefly noting how such an account satisfies the desiderata just articulated.

3. The pragma-dialectical account of the fallacy of question-begging

Van Eemeren and Grootendorst use the terms ‘begging the question’ and ‘circular argumentation’ to refer to the same fallacy.⁹ In line with their pragma-dialectical theory of fallacy, they deal with this fallacy as a violation of a rule for critical discussion.¹⁰ As is commonly known, the critical discussion is the pragma-dialectical specification of the procedure by which a protagonist and an antagonist, who have a difference of opinion concerning a particular proposition, attempt to resolve that difference by way of arguments so as to arrive at a result that is solely based on the merits of the protagonist’s case in favor of his standpoint and the merits of the antagonist’s case in favor of maintaining a critical stance towards that standpoint. A fallacy is a contribution by which the resolution of the dispute is

hindered or even blocked (van Eemeren and Grootendorst, 2004, chapter 7). How does presenting a circular argumentation hinder or block the resolution process and what rule or rules prohibit such begging the question?

In their account, the authors use an abstract example where the protagonist argues in favor of his standpoint “A” by way of an argument “A, therefore A”.

In the event of a difference of opinion, one discussant puts forward a standpoint and the other discussant calls that standpoint into question. These discussants are therefore *not* in agreement on the acceptability of this standpoint. If any attempt to resolve this difference of opinion by means of a regulated discussion is to have any chance of success, it is necessary for the discussants to adopt a number of propositions accepted by both parties (rule 3) as their starting point. The initial standpoint (in this case represented by “A”) cannot, of course, form any part of the list of agreements expressing propositions that are acceptable to both parties, otherwise there would be no difference of opinion. When the fallacy of *begging the question* is committed, it is only natural to suppose, just as in other cases, that the discussant who in the discussion fulfills the role of protagonist will in the argumentation stage at a certain moment express a proposition that he claims can be identified as a common starting

point by means of the intersubjective identification procedure. In the case of *begging the question*, the error that is made is that the protagonist then (intentionally or unintentionally) makes use of a proposition that, as he can know beforehand, is *not* to be found in the list of propositions that are acceptable to both parties, so that the intersubjective identification procedure [IIP] *cannot* yield a positive result.¹¹ If this statement were to occur in the list, or if it were to be added to the list, the difference of opinion would immediately be resolved, which is not the case here (Van Eemeren and Grootendorst, 2004, pp. 176-177).

Van Eemeren and Grootendorst write that begging the question is to be connected to Rule 3 and to the so-called intersubjective identification procedure (see also 2004, p. 180). Rule 3 states, among other things, that a “discussant remains obliged to defend the standpoint as long as he does not retract it and as long as he has not successfully defended it against the other discussant on the basis of the agreed premises and discussion rules” (2004, p. 139). The intersubjective identification procedure is a method of defense by which the parties, at the protagonist’s request, determine whether a premise, attacked by the antagonist, is identical to one of the common starting points agreed on in the opening stage or should be added to these (2004, p. 146-7). Rule 7 provides the

content of the notion of 'successful defense', as used in Rule 3, and shows how the intersubjective identification procedure is to be employed:

a. The protagonist has successfully defended the propositional content of a complex speech act of argumentation against an attack by the antagonist if the application of the intersubjective identification procedure yields a positive result or if the propositional content is in the second instance accepted by both parties as a result of a sub-discussion in which the protagonist has successfully defended a positive sub-standpoint with regard to this propositional content (Van Eemeren and Grootendorst, 2004, p. 147).

Thus, an argumentative defense is successful if each premise has either been shown to correspond to an agreed starting point or supported by a more or less complex reasoning such that the basic premises of that argument have been shown to correspond to an agreed starting point. So, a circular argument, when seen through, cannot be successful.

In addition to their system of rules that make up the model of critical discussion, Van Eemeren and Grootendorst provide '10 commandments' for the proper conduct within a discussion. According to the first part of Commandment 6 , "[a] party may not falsely present a premise as an

accepted starting point". Begging the question is also analyzed as a violation of this commandment (1992a, pp. 151-154).

4. Some issues of interpretation

Given the decision to use the expressions 'begging the question' and 'circular argumentation' as synonyms, and also given the examples provided by van Eemeren and Grootendorst (see below), we do not think that they have a weak conception of question begging in mind according to which the fallacy boils down to the use of premises that happen to be unacceptable to the addressee. Van Eemeren and Grootendorst picture a particular situation, where the protagonist put forwards as a premise something that boils down to the questioned standpoint, as prototypical for the fallacy of question begging. This strongly suggests that this fallacy must be taken to occur only in cases in where a premise is unacceptable to the antagonist *because* it is too closely connected with the standpoint under challenge.

We focus on two further issues of interpretation regarding the passages just quoted, using an abstract example, 'A therefore A*', where 'A' and 'A*' are assumed to be closely connected formulations and where 'therefore' indicates either a single step of reasoning or a longer chain of

reasoning. First, what is the connection between A and A*? Second, can an argument be question begging if it is not put forward with pretence of conclusiveness? After having dealt with these issues, we propose a criterion that fits in with what we consider to be a plausible interpretation of the pragma-dialectical view on the fallacy of begging the question.

4.1. How are A and A* to be connected?

According to van Eemeren and Grootendorst, the clearest case of the fallacy of begging the question is the one where a premise and the conclusion are syntactically identical (2004, p. 176), but they stress that there are less clear cases where premise and conclusion are similar enough to count as equivalent (2004, pp. 181-2). Thus, the notion of question begging clearly includes the *equivalence conception*. The authors further make it clear that a question begging argument can also be due to the occurrence of a premise that depends on the standpoint (1992a, p. 154; 1992b, p. 160). Of this dependency type they mention two kinds. The premise can presuppose the acceptance of the standpoint, such as in the argument ‘God exists, because it says so in the Bible and the Bible is the word of God’. In addition, there can be a ‘causal interdependence’ between the premises and the conclusion: ‘How do I know he is a man of taste? Because he smokes Willem II cigars. All men of taste

smoke Willem II' (1992a, p. 154). Thus a question begging argument can be constituted by a premise that is syntactically identical to the conclusion, or by a premise that is, in context, equivalent to the conclusion, or by a premise that presupposes the conclusion. The notion of causal interdependency is less clear, but we surmise that it points to a particular version of the notion of dependency.¹² We distinguish three ways in which a premise could be said to be dependent on the conclusion, and judge only the first to constitute a case of question begging as pragma-dialectically conceived.

(1) Premise A can be dependent on conclusion A* due to the circumstance that A follows from A* (possibly in conjunction with other premises, but A* being indispensable for the derivation of A) in the specific sense that the context is such that (a) there is no justification strategy available to the protagonist than to either give up or to offer A*, at some point, as part of the defense of A when the premise remains under challenge, whereas (b) A* has not (yet) been used to that very purpose (otherwise, it would be case of propositional identity or equivalence). As examples we can adduce a modified version of the Willem II example above. Suppose the protagonist argues that 'Frans is a man of taste' on the basis of 'only men of taste smoke Willem II,' it having been agreed that Frans smokes Willem II cigars. Then the context could be such that there is only one route available to the protagonist to defend the premise 'only men of taste smoke Willem II', to wit the route in which he must enumerate the agreed smokers of Willem II and obtain for each of them the concession that

that person is a man of taste. Among them one person is Frans: hence the premise can be supported only by adducing that 'Frans is a man of taste'.

The antagonist may presume an argument to be circular in this sense, but she can easily be wrong in her estimation of the available justification routes available to the protagonist (cf. Wilson, 1988, p. 41, on charges of begging the question made out of impatience). This 'presumptive dependency' (cf. Palmer on 'presumptively circular arguments', 1981, p. 392), resembles in an important respect, but in a fully dialectical vein,¹³ the objectivist criterion employed by Biro and Siegel (2006), according to which the criterion for question begging does not employ any doxastic idiosyncrasies. Whether a particular persuasion strategy exists is a dialectical matter: it is up to the protagonist to show its existence by playing the strategy, when challenged to prove its existence.

We assume that presumptive dependency fits in with the pragma-dialectical conception of the fallacy of question begging, because: (1) the modified Willem II example seems to exemplify it, and (2) the protagonist's error consists in making use of a proposition that has been challenged, namely in the final parts of the extended dialogues.

We reject a second and a third possible interpretation of dependency: (2) Premise A can be seen as dependent on conclusion A* due to the circumstance that A* clearly follows from A, in the specifically dialectical sense that it is clear to the participants that accepting A amounts to conceding

A* as well. In such cases, the antagonist's acceptance of A is dependent on her willingness to accept A*. (3) Premise A can depend on conclusion A* in the sense that, for some reason other than that A logically implies A* or that A presumptively depends on A*, A is unacceptable for the antagonist of A*, for instance because A is the sort of proposition that is typically criticized by people who are critical of standpoint A*. The mistakes involved are explicable by reference to rules 3 and 7 and Commandment 6. But due to the lack of any clear circularity, we judge these latter kinds of dependency not as constituting cases of question begging in a pragma-dialectical vein.

4.2 Is there a requirement of conclusiveness?

According to Rule 7, the protagonist is allowed to offer an argument using a premise that cannot by the intersubjective identification procedure be identified with any agreed proposition, provided that he is willing to defend this premise if challenged to do so. That makes it possible, we think, to construct an argument that is circular, but that does not make the errors analyzed with the help of Rule 3 and Rule 7 and that does not violate Commandment 6:. The protagonist can offer a circular argument and add that he is prepared to argue in favor of the premises: "God exists, because it says so in the Bible and the Bible is the word of God. Let me hasten to add that I have a further argument

in favor of my contention that the Bible is the word of God that does not rely on the existence of God.” The protagonist can also simply offer an argument in favor of the, yet, unacceptable premise: “God exists, because it says so in the Bible and the Bible is the word of God, something my mother told me”. Circular arguments that are presented as non-conclusive or where the problematic premise receives support, do not seem to commit the fallacy of question begging.

At an earlier occasion, van Eemeren and Grootendorst defined the fallacy of begging the question in the following way: “A protagonist commits this fallacy if he acts as if his standpoint has been adequately defended when, in fact, the starting point on which he relies in his defense is identical to the disputed proposition” (1992a, p. 153). This earlier definition conveys the component of conclusiveness more clearly than the more recent account quoted in Section 3.

4.3 Four criteria for question begging arguments

Because formulations and logical connections can be complex, it is, in our view, not superfluous to make it explicit in the criteria for ‘question begging argument’ both (1) that the circularity must be clear to the participants in the sense that the antagonist, when charging the protagonist of having

committed the fallacy of begging the question, must be capable of proving the appropriate connection between premise and conclusion within a sufficiently small number of steps and (2) that the antagonist did not, in the opening stage, concede something that boils down to the challenged standpoint.¹⁴ We may now formulate our criteria as follows:

An argument “A therefore A*” put forward by a protagonist Prot against an antagonist Ant in a discussion D at a stage s begs the question if and only if:

- i. A is identical to A*, or at stage s equivalent to A*, or A presupposes the acceptability of A*, or A is at s presumptively dependent on A* and
- ii. this connection between A and A* is, in principle, provable in a subdiscussion by Ant against Prot within a number of moves that has been fixed in advance of the argumentation stage, and
- iii. A has not been conceded by Ant as a common starting point in the opening stage of D (see note 11), and
- iv. ‘A therefore A*’ is presented as conclusive while there has not been an argument offered in support of A.

Begging the question, in this sense, can be problematic for a resolution oriented discussion in two quite different ways. (1) If the antagonist discovers that premise A is unacceptable, the protagonist has made a superfluous and avoidable move. (2) If the antagonist does neither detect the circularity nor that premise A is unacceptable, she will be misled into accepting something that should have been criticized, leading to a situation where one merit of the antagonist's position remains under-exposed.

5. Conclusion

Section 2 concluded with the specification of a set of desiderata which we suggest are requirements for any viable theory of fallacious circularity. We now conclude by showing how the proposed criteria for question-begging arguments, within the context of a pragma-dialectical approach to argumentation, meet all of the desiderata.

First, the pragma-dialectical approach, as interpreted by us, heeds the tradition of ordinary usage about the nature of the fallacy as vicious circularity, or question-begging, by including the clear cases where a premise is identical or clearly equivalent to the conclusion, and by including at least some arguments where the premise is dependent on the conclusion. That is, the pragma-dialectical

approach achieves a reflective equilibrium with our pretheoretical judgments, thereby meeting the first desideratum. Second, even though a diagnosis of circularity is to be explained by using logical terminology in some cases, and in other cases by reference to a sequence of dialogue moves, the flaw in the fallacy of begging the question is pragmatic, and specifically conversational, in nature. Third, and as a consequence of its conversational diagnosis, the pragma-dialectical approach stresses the diachronic features of question begging, by making the criteria for the fallacy make use of the commitments made and the challenges performed by the parties at the various stages of the discussion, and by reference to various discussion stages. Finally, the criterion that we propose for the pragma-dialectical conception of question begging does not make use of the beliefs of the participants, nor does it start from suppositions about the true characterization of reality, but instead it employs the public commitments and discussion moves performed or performable by the participants in a dialogue.

Acknowledgments

We want to thank the two anonymous referees for a number of very useful suggestions.

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¹ For discussions of Aristotle's account see Woods & Walton, 1982 and Basu, 1986.

² For this reason, Robinson (1971) takes the view that it is improper to accuse someone of having put forward a question begging argument. To Sorensen's mind (1996), Robinson denies that there exists a fallacy of begging the question, responding to it with the following rejoinder in an attempt to show Robinson's position to be untenable: "There is a fallacy of begging the question. Therefore, there is a fallacy of begging the question" (1996, p. 51). In our view, Robinson did not deny the existence of question begging arguments. Instead, he argued that the notion is a muddle or that accusations of question begging are improper given that arguments should be evaluated solely by their soundness (premise truth and deductive validity), or both (Robinson, 1971, p. 117).

³ In these cases, two additional assumptions must be made: first, any logically equivalent substitution for the stated premises must be permitted; second, the equivalence condition must be understood not as equivalence to the conjunction of the premises, but instead as, minimally, equivalence to some premise conjunct. Using these assumptions, the inference in *modus ponens* is equivalent to 'P and Q, therefore Q,' which meets the equivalence condition of circularity just stated (Cf. Woods and Walton, 1975, p. 112).

⁴ Woods and Walton later (1982, p. 80 ff.) qualify the extent of this distinction with the idea that, so long as different arguments can be chained together, a case of dependence can be shown to be a case of identity occurring over several chained arguments.

⁵ While Jacquette (1993, p. 321) seeks to restore the prospects of a logical approach, writing "we can never be sure that on some as yet unexplored logical continent there lurks no black swan of symbolic criteria for diagnosing, criticizing, and defending arguments against the charge of circularity," he does so by invoking an epistemic logic containing belief and justification-related terminology. Similarly, Garbacz (2002) offers a formal account which incorporates the contextual features of belief and inference into a logic of consequence.

⁶ Indeed, Truncellito (2004, p. 327) classifies question-begging as a rhetorical fallacy to be located in *arguers* (or, properly speaking, their argument moves) rather than arguments, where question-begging is a circular argument that is used in such a way as to be "wrong, inappropriate or unhelpful in dialectical contexts."

⁷ Lippert-Rasmussen (2001) also presents a doxastic account of fallacious circularity where fallaciousness depends on an addressee's (a) second-order beliefs about what makes it reasonable for him to accept an argument's premises, and (b) the actual grounds on which he accepts the premises of the argument.

⁸ In order to arrive at fair and correct judgements about whether an argument is question begging in some conversational context, one needs to be sufficiently sensitive to the positions that the participants hold, develop and aspire to during their dialogue. That is why we think that a pragmatic theory of question begging should also be concerned with the internal rational perspectives of the participants.

⁹ In their view, a circularity within an argument goes against the norms for critical discussion and thus constitutes the fallacy of question begging.

¹⁰ We do not here have the space to consider formal dialectical accounts (e.g., Hamblin, 1970; Mackenzie, 1994; Woods & Walton, 1978).

¹¹ To this one might object that since the IIP allows the introduction of new information (2004, pp. 146-7) the result could very well be positive in that A will now be added to the list. As Van Eemeren says, in that case "the difference of opinion would immediately be resolved". To exclude that case it must be assumed that the IIP (including any new information) has been applied to A with a negative result before the circular argument for A was presented..

¹² If proposition A (The Bible is the word of God) presupposes proposition B (God exists) then A can be said to be *dependent* on B, but not in the same sense as investigated as relevant to the example of the Willem II cigars. In the former case, B will not plausibly be put forward as a reason to convince the antagonist of the acceptability of A, the reason being that the B is connected in a similar way to the denial of A (The Bible is not the word of God). In the latter case, the dependence is argumentative in nature, and not presuppositional. Therefore, we do regard the presuppositional kind of question begging as different in kind as what van Eemeren and Grootendorst refer to as the causal kind (and which we will label 'presumptively dependent' below.).

¹³ Our analysis of presumptive dependency can be seen as an elaboration of a suggestion made by Mackenzie, (1994, p. 234). A similar idea is proposed by Walton (1991, p. 132).

¹⁴ We surmise that in order to extend this notion to also cover arguments that defend a method of reasoning by employing that method of reasoning itself, other rules than Rule 3 and Rule 7, or Commandment 6 are needed.